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CIA denies training car bombers

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WASHINGTON — The CIA denied yesterday that it had trained any Lebanese forces who were involved in a March 8 car bombing near Beirut that left more than 80 people dead and 200 wounded.

However, the denial did not rule out the possibility of some other connection between the CIA and the group that carried out the operation.

According to an account in Sunday's editions of the Washington Post, a CIA-trained-and-supported counterterrorist unit in Lebanon, acting without CIA authorization, was responsible for the bombing, which took place near the residence of Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, a militant Shiite Muslim leader.

The account said Fadlallah was believed responsible for terrorist attacks on U.S. installations.

Breaking a 24-hour silence on the report, CIA spokeswoman Patti Volz said, "The CIA never conducted any training of Lebanese security forces related to the events described" in the article.

The Post story said that the CIA and the Reagan administration had quickly canceled the counterterrorism operation after the bombing for fear that the U.S. ties to the group might be disclosed.

A New York Times account yesterday of the same incident said the Lebanese unit had been "working with" the CIA.

Volz's statement said that the CIA had no advance knowledge of the "counterterrorism action" and added that the agency also "scrupulously observes" its obligation to keep congressional intelligence oversight committees informed of its activities.

Lebanon's ambassador to the United States, Abdallah Bouhabib, said in a telephone interview that he had not been told of any American involvement in the March attack. He said he had assumed that the bombing was the work of a dissident Shiite faction.

The ambassador expressed concern that the Post story could put the lives of American diplomats in Beirut at risk.